



Building Stepfamilies That Work®

Helping Children Cope With Divorce: The Dos and Don'ts

© Bill Nodrick, PhD and Bev Nodrick, RSW 2006

The Dos

1. If possible, BOTH parents should meet with the child(ren) to inform them that a decision has been made to divorce.
2. If it is true, mention that a genuine, but unsuccessful effort was made to preserve the relationship.
3. Emphasize that BOTH parents have made the decision to divorce.
4. Stress that the divorce is not the fault of the child(ren) in any way. Reassure them that they did nothing to cause it, and that there is nothing they can do to prevent it or get you back together.
5. Be very clear that the decision is final and irreversible.
6. Reassure them that you will BOTH continue to co-parent them to the best of your abilities; and they will continue to have a close relationship with both of you.
7. Inform them where each parent will be living.
8. Tell them that you (i.e. both parents) have come to an agreement about where it will be best for each child to be living “for now”. [Note: Most children tend to change primary residences at least once; and typically do so when, developmentally, they need to spend more time with the other parent.]
9. Tell them where they will be living and going to school; and when they will visit with the non-custodial parent.
10. Make it clear that when they are staying with mom, they will be expected to follow the rules of her house; and when they are with dad, that they will be expected to follow the rules of his house.
11. As soon as possible, work to develop a set of rules and responsibilities that will work for each house. Maintain this structure until revisions are required and negotiated. [Kids need structure and don't feel loved if it isn't provided. They “search for limits” because they want and need them.]
12. Arrange regular one-on-one time for each child with each parent—and stick to it. Use this time to focus on your relationship with the child and your common interests.
13. Ensure that there is, at a minimum, a private space where a visiting child can keep his/her things.
14. Strive to have enough of the child's belongings on hand so that he/she doesn't need to live out of a suitcase.
15. Be reliable and punctual when shuttling the child(ren) from one home to the other.
16. Be aware that a “transition” time may be necessary to give the child(ren) an opportunity to adjust to the different “cultures” of the different households. Ask them what kind of a ritual they would like to have in place when they come from, or are leaving for the other parent's house.
17. Expect questions from the child(ren) and be prepared to provide explanations to the same questions for a period of months.
18. If the divorce severs the relationship between a child and one of his/her parents, secure the participation of a trusted individual (of the same gender as the absent parent) to fill in some of the gender specific adult-child interactions that children need, and that you cannot provide yourself.

19. Strive to keep the children “connected” with both sides of their extended family.
20. Anticipate that birthdays, holidays, vacations and special occasions are going to present difficulties. Plan ahead, but make certain you find out what others are wanting or needing, rather than making assumptions.
21. The breakdown of a family requires a major adjustment, but, with time, we do adjust. Drawing upon the supports we need and re-establishing our typical routines speeds up the process significantly.
22. Keep in mind that your children are only likely to do about as well as you do yourself, so take care of yourself. They need to know you are OK.

The Don'ts

1. Do not provide detailed explanations for the divorce. Children are not mature enough to understand. It will only serve to confuse them and/or make them angry.
2. Don't force or expect the child to take sides. Kids always love both of their parents—even if they are angry with one or both of them.
3. Do not allow younger children the choice of where they will reside. It is unfair because it forces them to pick between their parents. [Guidelines: Very young children simply need to be with the parent who has served as their primary care giver. Teenagers, on the other hand, need to be closer to their network of friends. Accordingly, their wants should be “taken into consideration” when making the decision of where they will reside.]
4. Never speak disrespectfully of, or towards the other parent in front of the child. It damages the child's self-esteem. Keep in mind that they have many of the same genes as the person you are “putting down”.
5. Do not ask the child(ren) to “spy” on the other parent; and don't try to pry information out of them.
6. Do not communicate with the other parent through the children. Do it directly (face-to-face, telephone, voice mail, email, etc.) or have a neutral third party do it.
7. Don't try to be the master of two households. Be respectful of the rules of the other household.
8. Do not expect the other parent to follow through on sanctions you have imposed.
9. Don't inflate the child's status. For example, don't say: “Now you are the man/woman of the house”. It places them under expectations that they can't meet and often creates little tyrants.
10. Don't share information with the child(ren) unless they can do something constructive with it. This is especially true about your new relationships, finances and support payments.
11. Don't use the child(ren) as your support group. Find the support of other adults.
12. Figure out, beforehand, how the parents can attend activities and events (e.g., parent-teacher meetings) without making it awkward or stressful for the child.
13. When you do start dating, don't introduce the child(ren) to this individual until you are committed to the relationship.

All rights reserved. The reproduction, use, distribution or storage or of this work, in whole or in part, by any and all means, without the express written permission of the author, is strictly prohibited.